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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on the findings from a study made in 1984 at the University of Central Florida on the subject of teacher isolation. One hundred and ninety-six elementary and secondary teachers responded to a survey questionnaire on their experiences in the school community and their attitudes toward more involvement with other teachers and administrators. A summary of their responses led to the conclusion that isolation does exist and that high school teachers might have more serious problems in this area than other teachers. A discussion is presented on conditions that can help to reduce the isolation of the classroom teacher, e.g., developing a climate of trust, sharing decision making, and training and staff development. Some specific strategies for increasing and improving social interaction among the school staff are suggested. (JD)

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DEALING WITH THE PROBLEMS OF TEACHER ISOLATION

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INTRODUCTION

If schools are to improve, serious efforts must be made to reduce the isolation of teachers. Is this a problem? Are teachers working in isolation? The recent Goodlad study[1] tells us that teachers are normally separated from one another and that little is done to encourage teachers to come together in their schools to discuss curriculum and instructional improvement.

Will this "coming together" of staff members be useful? There has been significant research that reinforces this concept and indicates that if improvement is to happen in schools, sharing of new knowledge and information within the organization must occur. Tye and Tye[2] describe their research which says that sharing is necessary but that most teachers they observed worked alone in self contained classrooms and had little opportunity to observe other teachers at work.

Cox and Wood[3] found teachers "alienated" within the organization with little opportunity for input into the decision making. The typical bureaucratic school organization appears to be a serious problem which encourages separation rather than centralization.

ISOLATION STUDY

A recent study at the University of Central Florida supports these ideas regarding teacher isolation[4]. One hundred and ninety six (196) teachers enrolled in various College of Education graduate programs were asked to respond to a survey instrument in the summer of 1984. In the sample, there were seventy three (73) elementary teachers; thirty six (36)

middle/junior high; and eighty seven (87) senior high school teachers.

The following summarizes their responses:

1. Over 80% of each group - elementary, junior/middle and senior high felt - "Your classroom is a private world which no one besides you and your students enter." Senior high school teachers' perceptions were higher than the others.
2. Very few teachers visit classrooms to observe and/or participate. Again, senior high school teachers appear to do less than the others.
3. Teachers are "formally observed" for evaluation purposes once or twice a year.
4. Very little "informal observation" occurs according to the teachers who were asked to respond.
5. Two of three elementary and senior high school teachers did not have peers observe them during the past year. Half of the middle/junior high school teachers said they had peers observe them.
6. There appears to be little encouragement to visit other classrooms particularly at the senior high school level.
7. Most elementary and middle/junior high teachers said they would like to visit other classrooms (80%). Sixty eight percent of senior high school teachers said they weren't sure.
8. Over half of the elementary and junior/middle school teachers said they would like other teachers to visit their classroom but over 50% of the high school teachers weren't sure.
9. All teachers indicated that the best way to share ideas and problems would be with informal gatherings.
10. In response to the question, "Do you feel your good work goes unnoticed?", over 85% of the elementary and middle/junior high school

teachers said, "sometimes" or "frequently" while 85% of the senior high school teachers said, "frequently" or "always".

11. Over 70% of each group believes it praises and supports other teachers.
12. In response to the question, "what motivates you to do a good job", approximately two out of three teachers said, "self".

If these data can be transferable, it can be concluded that teacher isolation does exist and that high school teachers might have more serious problems in this area than other teachers. This issue must be addressed if we believe that school improvement is associated with such concepts as teachers talking to one another and sharing information.[5]

CONDITIONS THAT CAN REDUCE ISOLATION

What can be done to remedy the situation? Are there strategies and solutions to this problem of teacher isolation? It can be done with committed leadership over a period of time if the following conditions can be developed and nurtured:

1. Trust. Developing a climate of trust within the school organization can be done by understanding and furthering the following behaviors:

   - Vulnerability - The extent to which the leader is perceived as having the capacity to be vulnerable; i.e., to err is human.
   - Loyalty - Commitment to consistent goals of the organization and its leaders.
   - Accepting others - Accepting the unique behavior of others.
   - Involving others - Using others for input or decision making.
   - Valuing - Willingness to exchange ideas and ideals with others.
   - Awareness - Sensitivity to the needs of others.
   - Communicating - Giving clear communications, both oral and written.
   - Openness - Willingness to explore new experiences.

- Honesty - Avoidance of deceit.[6]

2. Shared Decision Making. Everything we know about effective leadership and successful organizations tells us that this condition is essential. Why don't we have more of it? It might be because it appears to be so much easier to tell people what to do than to ask for and use their input.

Dealing with power seems to be very important as it relates to decisions. French and Raven[7] described five potential sources of power as follows:

1. Reward power: The control and distribution of rewards valued others.
2. Coercive power: The control and withholding of rewards valued by others.
3. Legitimate power: Authority legally vested in or assigned to a position.
4. Expert power: The expertise of special knowledge, skill or experience.
5. Referent power: Personal attractiveness or membership in someone's primary reference group.

Expert and referent tend to be especially important and may well be the most powerful powers. If this is the case, participative decision making can widen the base of expertness and create a "buying in" of those involved.

Peters and Waterman[8] in their best selling book, In Search Of Excellence, describe effective organizations which tended to decentralize authority and decision making. Concern for people and well developed group process skills are clearly indicated in their study of successful businesses.

3. Training and Staff Development. Schools that address this issue and bring the staff together for communication and human relations activities can do much to develop team building skills which can reduce isolation problems. Typically, inservice does not become involved in

this area but seems to pay more attention to cognitive skills and curriculum matters. How to implement a new reading program or managing student conduct are the predominant types of training delivered. We seem to be more concerned with the giving of information and rarely get to the real implementation level - how are we going to do it in our classrooms?

A recent conversation with a personnel manager of a large, very successful business shared this information regarding their training -- the factory workers employed average sixth grade education and are in several locations in the rural deep South. They participate in human relations/communication skill development training only. Why? Because the productivity curve continues to go up! As the manager indicated, "We do this kind of training because we will make money doing it. If productivity falls, we would do something else." Certainly, this kind of staff development might be just as important to the teacher and educational leader as the factory worker.

SPECIFIC STRATEGIES

Dealing with these conditions of developing trust, shared decision making and communications training are important in reducing isolation and should be addressed in improving the general school climate. In addition, the following ideas should be considered:

- The formation of quality circles, task forces or committees within the school to address issues, concerns and problems. Groups of interested participants to "problem solve" can do much to reduce isolation and alienation.
- Meetings which include presentations of the staff related to "what

is it I do". A school is a social system unto itself, and quite amazingly, many do not know what others are doing in their work. What is it that the guidance counselor does - or art teacher, or everyone else in the school? The less we know, the more we mistrust. The more we know about one another, the greater the opportunity for acceptance and growth.

- Some type of "required" peer observation could be extremely helpful. Too often our experience as a teacher is limited to viewing only a few other teachers. To see how Mary Jones organizes and Sam Smith disciplines can do much to expand our teaching skills repertoire. We are usually frightened or, at least, uneasy when someone else is in "our" room because we have had so few observers other than the mandatory evaluation-type observation.
- Anything to improve and increase social interaction with and among the staff would be meaningful. School breakfasts for the staff, parties, a faculty dining room and other get-togethers are opportunities to get to know staff members better. A principal in a large high school has the coffee pot and snacks in his outer office before school which "motivated" staff members to come by for their morning coffee. Not only does this provide an opportunity for business conversation but it creates a "team" feeling rather than just individual teachers routinely going about their business.
- Attendance at professional meetings should be encouraged. We tend to think only of our small world - our fifth grade or history classes. Exposure to other schools and people within and outside the district can give us a totally different perspective. Many school systems have a plan for teachers to visit other teachers in

different buildings. Again, such opportunities broaden perspective and widen horizons.

- Retreats at the beginning and/or the end of a school year can do much for determining goals or for evaluating progress. Coming together away from the school can do much in the way of developing shared values which is so important for an organization and can once again reduce feelings of isolation.
- Planned, periodic get-togethers by the staff to discuss professional reading and/or teaching techniques. When does a faculty do such a thing unless they are in some kind of credit course on inservice activity? Why not just an informal session once a month to discuss educational issues.

SUMMARY

I'm sure by now the reader can think of other examples of how to reduce isolation within their organization. What is important is that educational leaders pay attention to this issue and follow through with specific plans and strategies.

If we really believe that most of the answers to solving school problems exists within the staff itself, then bringing teachers and administrators together to address these issues is essential. There is no question that considerable isolation exists in schools today. How can we become more thoughtful and reflective regarding what we are doing professionally? Observation for improvement concerns and professional dialogue must occur if we are to improve interactions which, in turn, can reduce isolation and help us on the road to school improvement and professional growth.

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